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Henry James's Characters: Ethics through Different Awarenesses

Abstract

In this contribution we propose an ethical reading of some of Henry James' characters, focusing in particular on *The Portrait of a Lady*, one of the masterpieces of world literature, a milestone in the social and psychological debate related to women's awareness and emancipation. Relying on the dialectical tools of hermeneutics, we analyze the meanings of moral actions and feelings as built into the plot, comparing different paths of ethical awareness.

Keywords

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Narrative Identity, Adaptive Preferences, Moral Commitment

Introduction

In this contribution we will try to outline an ethical discourse on some of Henry James' characters, focusing in particular on *The Portrait of a Lady*, one of the masterpieces of world literature, a milestone in the social and psychological debate related to women's awareness and emancipation. Relying on the dialectical tools of hermeneutics, we analyze the meanings of moral actions and feelings as built into the plot, comparing different paths of ethical awareness.

We are certainly aware of the warning about the ambiguity of doing ethics through literary plots. Philosophical readings of James' works and characters pose a dilemma: to what extent does the plot itself become an ethical issue, or is it not, rather, the explanation of that plot and its reviews that lend themselves to an ethical view?

And what is the relationship between the perception of particulars (so

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crucial for James) and general moral principles and rules? Hilary Putnam's doubt arises precisely from the operation of moral reading of some of James' novels offered by Martha Nussbaum: "are works of fiction also works of moral philosophy? The work of fiction must not be confused with the commentary, and it is the commentary that is (or can be) a work of moral philosophy"¹. If this doubt always makes sense, so does what Robert B. Pippin argues, demonstrating it precisely with James' plots: if his characters are paradigmatic, they are "not just because of the melodramatic, fairy-tale, and mythic possibilities such a type opens up, but because the phenomenon allows him to raise for his readers the question of the moral reaction without which the novels would not work aesthetically in the first place, would not create the allegiances and revulsions necessary for our engagement"². In other words, moral categories can be like weapons used by the narrator, but James's case is different because he himself dwells on the nature of moral statements, the subjects who inevitably make use of it, and the social and historical world in which that moral action is defined.

¹ H. Putnam, *Taking Rules Seriously: a Response to Martha Nussbaum*, in "New Literary History", vol. XV, n. 1, 1983, pp. 193-200, specifically p. 199; cfr. M.C. Nussbaum, *Perception and Revolution: The Princess Casamassima and the Political Imagination*, in Ead., *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford University Press, New York 1990, pp. 195-198. In this context, the debate between Putnam and Nussbaum focuses on the character of Hyacinth Robinson, the young London bookbinder who becomes involved in radical politics and a terrorist assassination plot, with a series of political considerations on the novel *The Princess Casamassima*: "Putnam acknowledges that it is essential to James's moral vision that the perception of particulars is in a sense prior to general moral rules and principles – that in this sense the fine-tuned nonabstractness of these novels appropriately expresses something that was important to James's conception of what human life should be. But Putnam expresses doubts about the value of this idea as a model, even for the personal life. He charges that this morality of perceptions, which is also a morality of tender attention towards particular, is dangerously lacking in general rule-guided toughness. A person who deliberates in the way that James recommends might be all too free from binding obligations, all too capable of any trade-offs. I have more than once tried to answer this charge between rules and perceptions that we actually find in James's morality. But even if we can defend James in that context, we might still feel that the objection has some force in the political life, where even moral thinkers who advocate particularism in personal choice still sometimes claim that we need to be guided by firm and general rules" (ivi, p.198).

² R. B. Pippin, *Henry James & Modern Moral Life*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2001, pp. 4, 5; "James is as aware as we are nowadays that moral categories can be ideological, reflections of the requirements and interests of social position and power, or can be understood psychologically, as a reflection of needs and desire and especially anxieties, never a part of but always behind and motivating the great work of interpretative consciousness that is so much his theme".

1. Narrative and social identities

Henry's method of writing from the point of view of a character within the story allowed him to explore the movements of consciousness and the traces of perception, enabling us, scholars of ethics and hermeneutics, to be able to draw on his descriptions in order to discuss and understand the meaning of human actions³. What ever becomes of such things, impressions and desire – James asks – in the long intervals of consciousness? “In what unvisited cupboards and crannies of our being do they preserve themselves?”⁴.

This is not the context for a phenomenological analysis of consciousness, of course, but we could certainly add Henry James to the great names in literature to which the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur refers to explain his notion of *narrative identity* (like Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Robert Musil). Ricoeur firmly believes that the answer to the twentieth-century question of the “subject” is the identity of the character built into the plot, a self as another (*Soi-même comme un autre*, the title of his famous work⁵), which is first and foremost that *third-person* character in the narrative of our personal lives; narrative identity is the sort of identity to which a human being has access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function.

We are convinced and will continue to hold this hermeneutic position: narrative is a fundamental part of how we represent ourselves as individuals, and society. When we speak of the literary imagination as public imagination, fundamental to any citizenship and public policy education, we also refer to the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who focuses on an in-depth reading of complex and important novels by James such as *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl* and *The Princess Casamassima*, writing that “James often stresses this analogy: the work of the moral imagination is in some manner like the work of the creative imagination, especially that of the novelist”⁶. According to this conception, the novel is in itself a moral achievement.

Among the most recent studies in cognitive neuroscience, we are thinking of Anil Seth's work on the origin and meanings of consciousness: there is a downsizing of the role of narrative, based on the fact that what we experience seems to be constructed from the predictions of the brain,

³ T. Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2006.

⁴ H. James, *Diary of a Man of Fifty*, Macmillan and Co., London 1923, p. 3.

⁵ P. Ricoeur, *L'identité personnelle et l'identité narrative*, in *Soi-même comme un autre*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1990, pp.137-166.

⁶ M. C. Nussbaum, *Literature and the Moral Imagination*, in *Love's Knowledge*, cit. p.148.

and not from perceptions that come to us from outside⁷. But this is another discussion, which we should address in another context, talking about Seth's discoveries, but also about Harari's beliefs, for whom *homo sapiens* is a *storytelling animal*: "when we seek the meaning of life, we want a story that explains what reality is and what my particular role is in the cosmic drama. This role makes me part of something bigger than myself and gives meaning to all my experiences and choices"⁸.

2. Desire and disposition: the ethical awareness of Isabel Archer

The Portrait of a Lady has been of great significance in the journey of women's awareness and emancipation, as shown in the 1996 film version by Australian director Jane Campion. The movie makes this story a symbol of feminism. A story made of the true passions of human beings, but also their most challenging moral demands: freedom, desire, sense of self, decision, responsibility.

The main character is Isabel Archer, a young American girl, full of life, intelligence and curiosity about the world. It is precisely this intellectual vivacity and curiosity that James gives the reader, even before telling us whether she is tall, short, beautiful or not so beautiful. Isabel is a woman of mind: the beauty and charm she exerts on the other protagonists, starting with her cousin Ralph, are those of ideas, of the strong personality of someone with a strong will. She used to live in America, orphaned by her parents, until her unconventional aunt Lidia, the British aristocrat Mr. Touchett's wife, proposes a break with her previous life and takes her to Europe, first to the United Kingdom, then to Paris, and finally to Italy. Isabel is American on the inside, but wishes to change: James writes that "her *disposition* of mind gave value to every change".

Desire and *disposition* are two words close to the language of ethics. Lucretius, in Book IV of *De rerum natura* on love, writes pages on this relationship between perception and desire, explaining how the mutual support of these two elements determines the dynamics of freedom, even in love. The lover thinks his desire originates from the beloved, while Lucretius invites us to understand that the perception of the beloved is influenced by desire. We know that the "*effluvia*" or "*simulacra*" are in the air around us; we select those that respond to the desires and dispositions we

⁷ "Ecco perché l'AI non ha la coscienza come noi umani", La Repubblica, 15/4/2023, p. 36; cfr. A. Seth, *Being You: Aw Science of Consciousness*, Faber&Faber, London 2021.

⁸ Y. Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Random, New York 2018.

already have. Perception functions as a kind of “attention to”, constrained, however, by desire. At the same time, desire is reinforced in perception⁹.

This strong interconnection between desire and perception will allow us to understand how Isabel's love choices act on her destiny. Isabel has a desire for absolute freedom. She comes to the old Europe to explore it and explore herself, to see what she will make of herself, and what life will make of her. It is the thirst for experience, with the mixture of desire for knowledge and imagination, that moves her. The innocence-experience antinomy is typical of Jamesian literature and is resolved in many characters in the antithesis between imagination and knowledge: imagination drives Isabel to leave Albany to conquer “pure truth”, where experience “will teach her to *recognize* only evil”¹⁰.

She is so different from the ordinary women of the time, who think of the future only in terms of marriage, children, domesticity. She is American, and her friends who come to visit her from the States are also women engaged in a profession, journalists active in society, while European women are still tied to the marriage, dowry, inheritance scheme. This willingness to self-determine her own destiny becomes the character's defining feature. James writes:

She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own¹¹.

In this absolute independence, Isabel lives her stay in England with enthusiasm, and with extreme levity she refuses the marriage proposal of two distinguished gentlemen, who are in love, respectable, and above all, well-off. Both speak to Isabel of a world behind them, a belonging to social configurations that are part of themselves. To accept one of them is to become part of a defined socio-political world. But this is precisely the step that Isabel cannot and she will not take.

Why? Because she does not want to stop, she does not want to shelter herself in those rest areas in a stream of life that has just begun, and which she does not want to give up even if it will be painful. “I can never

⁹ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book IV, [W. E. Leonard](#), S. B. *Smith* (ed.), University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2011.

¹⁰ F. Marroni, *The Portrait of a Lady*, in *Invito alla lettura di Henry James*, Mursia, Milano 1983, p. 70.

¹¹ H. James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Ch. VII, Feedbooks Digital Publishing, Paris (1881 edition).

be happy in any extraordinary way – Isabel tells Lord Warburton– Not by turning away, by separating myself [...] from life, from the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer”¹².

If the first word in Isabel’s ethical language is *desire* and the second is *disposition*, the third is *freedom*, understood as the ability to throw oneself into circumstances, to face the risks and dangers of existence and to be able to choose among them. This is not an abstract freedom, but a concrete one, just as concrete and embodied is her desire, the result of a disposition: her human history gave birth to it and gave it substance.

She spent half of her time in thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity; she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action: she held it must be detestable to be afraid or ashamed. She had an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong [...]. On the whole, reflectively, she was in no uncertainty about the things that were wrong. She had no love of their look, but when she fixed them hard she recognised them. It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel; she had seen very little of the evil of the world, but she had seen women who lied and who tried to hurt each other. Seeing such things had quickened her high spirit; it seemed indecent not to scorn them [...]. Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was. Sometimes she went so far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded¹³.

Isabel’s happiness is a journey, and it is achieved in the “fragility of goodness”, to use an expression offered by Martha Nussbaum: the constitutive fragility of our existence, revealed by all our emotions, fear, compassion, and love. “You want to see life, you’ll be hanged if you don’t [...]” – cousin Ralph says – “You want to drain the cup of experience”. “No, I don’t wish to touch the cup of experience. It’s a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself” – Isabel answers¹⁴.

This “seeing with her own eyes” is the beginning of an aesthetic experience, of a burning carnality, an attraction that will lead her into the arms of Gilbert Osmond, the uneasy and charming profiteer whom she meets in his beautiful and old fashioned Florentine villa full of antiques, taste and decadence.

We know the end of the story: all the intelligence, the desire for experience, ends up in a funnel of ambiguous situations, secrets, lies, in short

¹² *Ibid.*, Ch. XIV.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Ch. VI.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Ch. XV.

they result in failure and unhappiness. Osmond turns out to be very different from what she had imagined. He presented himself as a free man, capable of nonconformist choices; he kept telling her that he did not need wealth, that he wanted to live away from worldliness, that he wanted to be self-sufficient in his mansion and his world of art and beauty. All of this had attracted Isabel: she had finally found someone who could love her not for her social *status* as a beautiful and brilliant American woman, and not to make her a perfect wife. This was, instead, the biggest mistake: thinking that Osmond was a free man like her, and that by him she would be understood and loved in her freedom.

Osmond turns out to be a perfect manipulator, an ungenerous conformist seeking money to promote the aesthetic representation of himself as an elegant *connoisseur* of beauty and art. Italian literary critic Pietro Citati wrote that Gilbert Osmond and his accomplice, the old mistress Madame Merle, “belong to the realm of evil”. Osmond marries Isabel for her inheritance. Madame Merle imprisons her young friend Isabel in this marriage to secure a future for the daughter she secretly had with Osmond. More than evil, their actions are mediocre and vulgar. However, Henry James teaches us that “evil is not expressed only, or especially, in evil actions: it is an essence, a feeling, an atmosphere, something inexpressible, which no human act can fully realize”¹⁵.

James takes the archetypal form of the circle as a metaphor for human consciousness and its relationship to reality, and so the psychological and ethical insight of Isabel's character gradually grows and is realized in the latter part of the novel, when Isabel makes her moral choice and stays in the old world. In the novel's ending, James makes her go to England, away from that Roman prison in which Osmond has locked her up, but then seems to suggest a return to her duties as a wife, to the responsibility of a destiny she had chosen. Director Jane Campion, however, chooses another ending: Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman in the movie) closes a door behind her, and gives us hope that she will never return to the cynical Gilbert Osmond (the actor John Malkovich).

3. Adaptive preferences and different awarenesses

The individual's conflict with his inner self, but especially with his surroundings, is one of the most representative themes of Henry James' narrative. His own condition as someone who left the United States to settle in Europe was transposed into his novels (think of *The American* or *The*

¹⁵ P. Citati, *Isabel ultima estasi*, La Repubblica, 6/9/1994.

Golden Bowl), with all the fatigue, disappointments and misunderstandings he experienced. *The Master* is the fictional biography dedicated to Henry James by Irish writer Colm Tóibín, the book that has established him as one of the most highly regarded writers of recent years. Tóibín describes precisely the story of the loneliness, desires and despair of a mysterious man who never came to terms with the world around him.

James lived always on the edge, not feeling integrated into either of the societies he experienced, the American society of his birth and the English society of his adoption¹⁶. The psychology of his characters is almost always built precisely on this clash between the old world, the artistically refined but corrupt Europe, and the new world, the outspoken, self-confident but puritanical America of social conventions. That is why it is not just characters, but ages, cultures, ethics.

The character of Isabel is the emblem of this precariousness, this “adaptive” failure, but in the view of many scholars of his work, she is also the symbol of an American innocence that is corrupted by European customs and mentality.

Isabel’s all-positive and naive attributes clash with the costumes of a Europe consumed in vice, and James chooses the very beauty of two ancient Italian cities, Florence and Rome, to provide the setting for Osmond’s decadent corruption and Isabel’s fall of ideals. In fact, “behind the Europe-America relationship lies a more or less conscious examination of the historical process marking the final collapse of the European aristocracy and the emergence of a vigorous entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of which the American continent was producing the most powerful and dynamic representatives”¹⁷.

We found support for our reflections in the reading of James offered by Michael Gorra’s text, although a political interpretation seems to prevail. Gorra places at the center of the novel “a critique of American exceptionalism”¹⁸. The basic political difference between the two continents manifests itself as a difference in moral awareness.

Isabel is always described as a young woman called to an exceptional destiny of will and freedom; she believes in happiness to be pursued independently, in her self-determination. Instead, the European experience will change for her precisely this *dna* made up of conviction for the new, a new world, a fresh start. In Europe Isabel learns that her life is already “determined”. And so, on one side of the ocean is a society with the myth of creating history and the future, believing in republican egalitarianism and freedom to pursue individual happiness through competition; on the

¹⁶ C. Tóibín, *The Master*, Scribner, New York 2005.

¹⁷ F. Marroni, *op. cit.*, p. 46; la traduzione è nostra.

¹⁸ M. Gorra, *Portrait of a Novel: Henry James and the Making of an American Masterpiece*, Liveright, New York 2013.

other side is a Europe rooted on the strength of "tradition" and the legacy of the concept of "class".

In short, Europe shows an awareness that circumstances determine choices, a far more realistic vision than the *American Dream*. It is interesting to point out another change in James's characters: at first, as soon as they arrive from America, they see themselves as similar to Europeans and get excited about finding things in common. But then, the more time passes, the more they discover themselves different and tend to reaffirm their identity.

Isabel's story could be the manifesto of women condition even today, from the political perspective of the current *Capability Approach* of economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum. When Nussbaum, in fact, asks what might be the right application of that universalist model of social growth outlined by *capabilities*, she is dealing precisely with the "preferences" of individuals¹⁹.

If we are to promote social development in terms of justice and equality, Nussbaum tells us that we should not go to economic-financial detectors of growth, such as *gross domestic product*, because they turn out to be disconnected from the real population. *Gdp* tells us nothing about the actual ability of a democracy to guarantee adequate capabilities for people, that is, to guarantee their ability to express themselves, to feed themselves, to educate themselves, to access care, to use their imagination. Similarly, the utilitarian code of "preferences" is a distortion of reality: one cannot evaluate a social organization by taking into account only the preferences of individuals. Nussbaum's examples are almost always examples of women's conditions in disadvantaged countries: well, if you go and look closely at those lives and the so-called preferences expressed by women, you get a distorted picture of what are the genuine demands of justice and equality, because a lot of them can only express "adaptive preferences": which means preferences matured in their own contexts, in the circumstances in which they find themselves living. Many of those women do not express education as a preference only because they do not know it, because they have never had it, or may express a preference of staying at home that is not authentic, but only imposed by tradition.

Adaptive preferences have to do with desires: through Isabel's story we have a good understanding of how desires are not neutral, but determined by context, by dispositions. How many women still "prefer" to tolerate abuse and violence because they are used to this normality? A preference-based system cannot counter this culture of remission and abuse, which is all adaptive. Instead, a system based on the protection of

¹⁹ M. C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2000.

capabilities would work precisely on the education of these preferences, and give the guarantee of entitlement and, more importantly, awareness of that entitlement, even before the choice to exercise it or not.

Isabel Archer was born 142 years ago, but she still has a long way to go: to close that door behind her and start over, or to return to marital responsibility; to make better choices from the start, or to make more mistakes, which will give birth to more stories, more novels, more literature.

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